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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000179

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: DEMONSTRATION PEACEFULLY DISBURSED, SOME ARRESTS

REF: A. (A) 05 MINSK 759

[1](#)B. (B) 05 MINSK 1148

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4(B,D  
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[1](#)1. (C) At 1800 on February 16, opposition groups Zubr and Charter 97 organized a peaceful demonstration on October Square as part of the Day of Solidarity campaign to encourage public support for the families of the disappeared figures and for overall democratic change in Belarus. Poloffs, who observed the event, estimate that around 120 people lined up along the square and lit candles. There was a light uniformed police presence and moderate plainclothes BKGB presence. A number of journalists were present and were allowed to film the entire event. At 1820 about 30 plainclothes officers came and formed a line parallel to the demonstrators. At approximately 1830 the officers, joined by some additional uniformed police, began to gently push about half the crowd across the square to a side street. After herding them back a block, the police returned and did the same with the other half of the crowd, at which point most of the demonstrators disbursed. Poloffs did not witness any arrests or violence on October Square, but admit that arrests might have occurred after security forces removed protestors from the general vicinity. Poloffs saw prominent members of Charter 97, former deputy FM Sannikov and his wife Irina Khalip, Zubr, deputy Aleksandr Atroschenkov, and the 10 's United Civic Party, deputy Lyudmila Gryaznova, at the event.

[1](#)2. (C) That evening Charter 97 reported on its web site that there were more than 200 protestors holding candles, and they were faced by "hundreds of police" who "brutally disbanded" the peaceful rally, detaining more than 20. Charter also showed photos of demonstrators lying on the ground with police standing over them. An Associated Press reporter told BBC that, "several people were beaten and violently dragged into waiting police wagons." Poloffs witnessed none of this. There were police arrest vans present, but at no time did they approach the crowd. (Note: Admittedly, Poloffs did not stand in the crowd for safety reasons, but they were usually within 50 yards of events.)

[1](#)3. (C) On February 17, Poloff spoke with Radio Liberty reporter Lyubov Lunina, who was in the crowd at the event. Lunina claimed that Charter's reporting is inaccurate. She said there was no violence at October Square, and everything was calm. Several demonstrators and policemen did fall to the ground when the crowd was pushed back onto an ice skating rink, but they simply slipped and were not pushed. She stated that police arrested two or three Malady Front members near October Square. Lunina said she heard some police say they had orders to make some arrests and to charge demonstrators with petty hooliganism, rather than the

political crime of participating in an unsanctioned demonstration.

¶4. (C) Lunina said that Zubr staged a small simultaneous demonstration in front of BKGB headquarters. Police responded immediately and arrested 16 young activists. Lunina said she heard, but could not confirm, that these activists tried to light their candles at the police station and that police may have responded with some force. Lunina and Post cannot confirm if anyone was hurt.

¶5. (C) Mariya Danilova, an AP reporter from Moscow, told Ambassador that she witnessed the beginning of the demonstration. She estimated about 200 persons gathered peacefully, including about 20 journalists. She left before the police made any effort to move the crowd, but she said her colleague reported that as the police moved people back, a couple dozen of the demonstrators actively resisted and were forcibly pushed into police vans. The rest of the crowd quietly followed police orders and disbursed. This reporter did not raise the event with Ambassador during his interview with her.

¶6. (C) Comment: The February 16 gathering, while not huge, was the largest demonstration in nearly a year and the largest to be organized since the start of the Solidarity 16 campaign. The demonstrators seemed determined to maintain civic order, which could be why authorities allowed the demonstration to take place for 30 minutes. Belarusian opposition groups used to stage such demonstrations a couple times a month. After some protests in spring 2005, things quieted down. There was one Chain of Concern in July with 25 people (ref A), and a Zubr protest in September with around 100 people (ref B). These were the only significant

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demonstrations in Belarus in the past ten months. The AP reporter from Moscow noted that the crowd of 200 did not indicate great public support for change, although it is good some Belarusians are brave enough to demonstrate.

¶7. (C) Comment cont'd: Several groups have talked about staging demonstrations before and after the elections, but it remains to be seen if they can mobilize their supporters, who seem to have fallen out of the habit of demonstrating. Adding to their difficulties, 10 campaign leader Vintsuk Vyachorka told Poloff recently the opposition has heard authorities will close the central train station in Minsk during and after elections to prevent demonstrators from congregating in the capital. Vyachorka also expects police to block vans and buses from entering Minsk, as they did during the 2004 parliamentary elections.

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